Abraham, Isaac, and Britten: Conflict and Reconciliation in *War Requiem*[1]

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The Requiem mass for centuries has been a celebration of and a prayer for the souls of the deceased, as well as a consolation for the living, and it has served as the basis for numerous well-known choral works, including those by Mozart, Berlioz, and Verdi. Following in this tradition, yet departing from it, is Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*. His combination of portions of the Latin Requiem Mass with nine English poems by the World War I poet-soldier Wilfred Owen may at first glance seem a sacrilegious mutilation of the mass in the service of expressing Britten's well-known pacifist beliefs, but this attitude ignores the work's original context and purpose.

Britten wrote *War Requiem* for the festivities surrounding the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral. As he noted in his speech when he accepted the first Aspen Award in 1964,

> I believe… in occasional music…. [A]lmost every piece I have ever written has been composed with a certain occasion in mind, and usually for definite performers, and certainly always human ones….
>
> When I am asked to compose a work for an occasion, great or small, I want to know in some detail the conditions of the place where it will be performed, the size and acoustics, what instruments or singers will be available and suitable, the kind of people who will hear it, and what language they will understand…. The text of my *War Requiem* was perfectly in place in Coventry Cathedral—the Owen poems in the vernacular, and the words of the Requiem Mass familiar to everyone—but it would be pointless in Cairo or Peking…. Music does not exist in a vacuum, it does not exist until it is performed, and performance imposes conditions…. I prefer to study the conditions of performance and shape my music to them.[2]

The context of *War Requiem* is the Coventry Cathedral, both new and old. The original Cathedral of St Michael in Coventry was destroyed on November 14, 1940 in one of the first German air raids on Great Britain in World War II. All that survived of the building were the bell tower and most of the outer walls, piles of rubble, and some of the roof timbers, two of which were found lying in the shape of a cross. These timbers were bound together and mounted on an altar with the words "Father, Forgive." In the spirit of these words, the congregation of St Michael

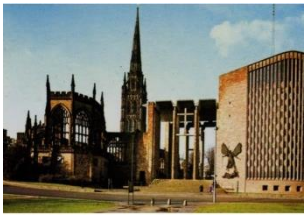
[1] This paper was selected through a blind selection process and presented at the international conference "Benjamin Britten at 100: An American Centenary Symposium Celebration," Illinois State University, October 24-27, 2013.
[2] Benjamin Britten, *On Receiving the First Aspen Award*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), pp. 10-13.

decided that the cathedral would be rebuilt and the impetus behind the rebuilding would not be hatred, defiance, or vengeance, but reconciliation.

Reconciliation, by definition, cannot exist without a prior difference or conflict between at least two entities, and it is meaningless if the reason for it is forgotten or unacknowledged. The establishment of the new cathedral building next to, rather than in place of, the ruins of the old recognizes this aspect of reconciliation, and Britten's music does as well (Ex. 1).

Ex. 1: Two views of the old and new Coventry cathedrals

(personal photo, 1995)



(postcard, date unknown)

Britten's choice, placement, and setting of the texts of *War Requiem* reveal a six-step progression in the creation, development, and reconciliation of conflict (Fig. 1), with each of the six movements as a step: Requiem Aeternam introduces conflict, which is followed by an extended development and intensification in the Dies Irae, the climax in the Offertorium, and an unresolved ending in the Sanctus. Reconciliation is then introduced with the Agnus Dei, and developed and brought to fruition in the Libera Me.

Britten's use of the English poems has been compared to the medieval process of troping, the addition of newly composed text and music to an existing chant in order to embellish or comment upon it. To develop this progress of conflict to reconciliation in *War Requiem*, Britten inserted each of Owen's poems, in whole or in part, at points in the liturgical text where the commentary would be most shockingly appropriate, each poem being allied with the Latin text immediately preceding it.

Fig. 1: Purpose and relative positions of texts in *War Requiem*:

Purpose	Requiem (Latin)	Owen (English)
Introduction of conflict	I. REQUIEM AETERNAM Requiem aeternam (Introit) Te decet hymnus (Introit verse)	
		'Anthem for Doomed Youth'
	Kyrie eleison	
Development Intensification	II. DIES IRAE Dies irae (vv. 1-4)	
		'Bugles Sang'
	Liber scriptus (vv. 5-8)	
		'The Next War'
	Recordare Jesu pie (vv. 9-10, 12-13, 15) Confutatis maledictis (vv. 16-17)	
		'Sonnet: On Seeing a Piece of Our Artillery Brought into Action'
	Lacrimosa (v. 18)	
		'Futility'
	Pie Jesu	
Climax	**III. OFFERTORIUM** Domine Jesu Christe (Quam olim Abrahae)	
		'The Parable of the Old Men and the Young'
	Hostias et preces tibi (Quam olim Abrahae)	
Unresolved end	IV. SANCTUS Sanctus	
		'The End'
Promise of reconciliation	V. AGNUS DEI	
		'At a Calvary near the Ancre' 'One ever hangs...' (first stanza)
	Agnus dei	
		'Near Golgotha...' (second stanza)
	Agnus dei	
		'The scribes...' (third stanza)
	Agnus dei [Dona nobis pacem]	
Reconciliation	VI. LIBERA ME Libera me	
		'Strange Meeting'
	In paradisum	'Let us sleep now...' (last line)
	Requiescant in pace, amen.	

According to this organizational scheme, the Offertorium represents and illustrates the climax of conflict, and Britten's choice of both textual and musical material reinforces this position. The texts of the Offertorium include the Latin Offertory and Owen's poem "The Parable of the Old Men and the Young," a subversive retelling of the story of Abraham and Isaac from the Book of Genesis:

Offertory:

Domine Jesu Christe, Rex gloriae,	Lord Jesus Christ, King of glory,
libera animas omnium fidelium	deliver the souls of the faithful departed
defunctorum de poenis inferni,	from the pains of hell, and the
et de profundo oacu: libera eas	bottomless pit: deliver them
de ore leonis, ne absorbeat eas tartarus,	from the jaw of the lion, lest hell engulf
ne cadant in obscurum.	them, lest they be plunged into darkness.
Sed signifer sanctus Michael	But let the holy standard-bearer Michael
repraesentet eas in lucem sanctam:	lead them into the holy light,
Quam olim Abrahae promisisti	As Thou didst promise Abraham
et semini ejus.[3]	and his seed.
Hostias et preces tibi Domine	Lord, in praise we offer to thee
laudis offerimus;	sacrifices and prayers;
tu suscipe pro animabus illis,	do Thou receive them for the souls of those
quarum hodie memoriam facimus:	whom we remember this day:
fac eas, Domine, de morte transire ad vitam.	Lord, make them pass from death to life.
Quam olim Abrahae promisisti	As Thou didst promise Abraham
et semini ejus.	and his seed.

"Parable of the Old Men and the Young":[4]

1 So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
2 And took the fire with him, and a knife.
3 And as they sojourned both of them together,
4 Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
5 Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
6 But where the lamb for this burnt offering?
7 Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
8 And builded parapets and trenches there,
9 And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
10 When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
11 Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
12 Neither do anything to him. Behold,
13 A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
14 Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
15 But the old man would not so, but slew his son,--
16 And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

[3] Bolding added to highlight reference to Abraham.
[4] *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, edited with a memoir and notes by Edmund Blunden (London: Chatto and Windus, 1931; reprint, 1955), p. 57.

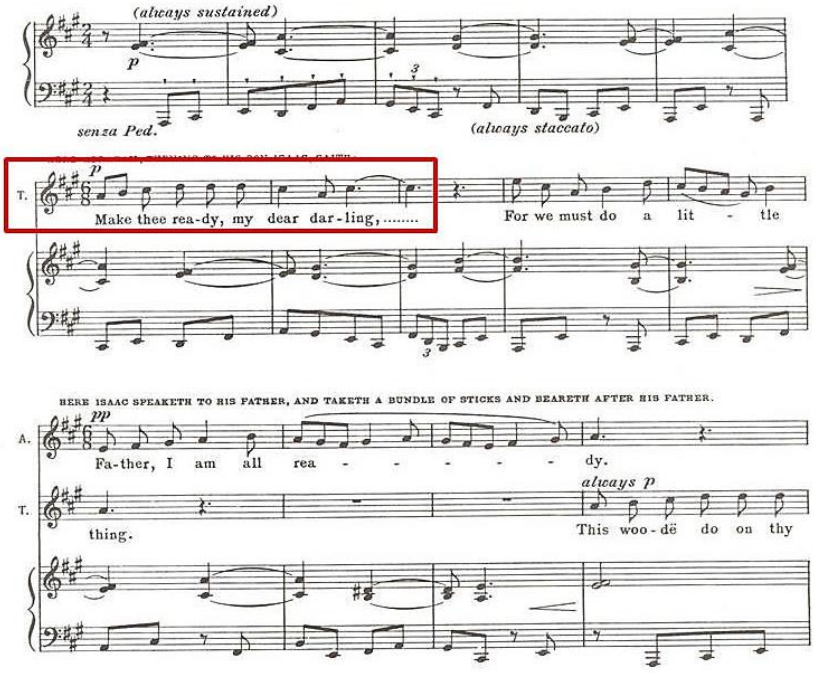
Britten's usual technique for joining the Latin texts and Owen's English poetry is through a common image that can be reinforced musically. In the Offertorium, the common image appears to be the act of sacrifice as symbolized by Abraham. As for the musical reinforcement, the possibilities must have been evident to Britten immediately, for only ten years prior to *War Requiem* he had produced *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*.

Canticle II, a setting of the Abraham and Isaac portion of the Chester Mystery Play for alto, tenor and piano accompaniment, is the source of almost all of the musical material found in the Offertorium. This relationship of the two works has long been recognized, but surprisingly the textual connections between the two have been almost completely neglected in favor of the strictly musical ones. This is unfortunate, because the strength of the relationship comes from the texts supported by the music, not from the music alone. By considering the texts in conjunction with the music, it becomes clear that Britten compared Owen's "Parable" very closely with the *Canticle* so that he could carefully mine the earlier work to illustrate conflict and its immediate aftermath in *War Requiem.*

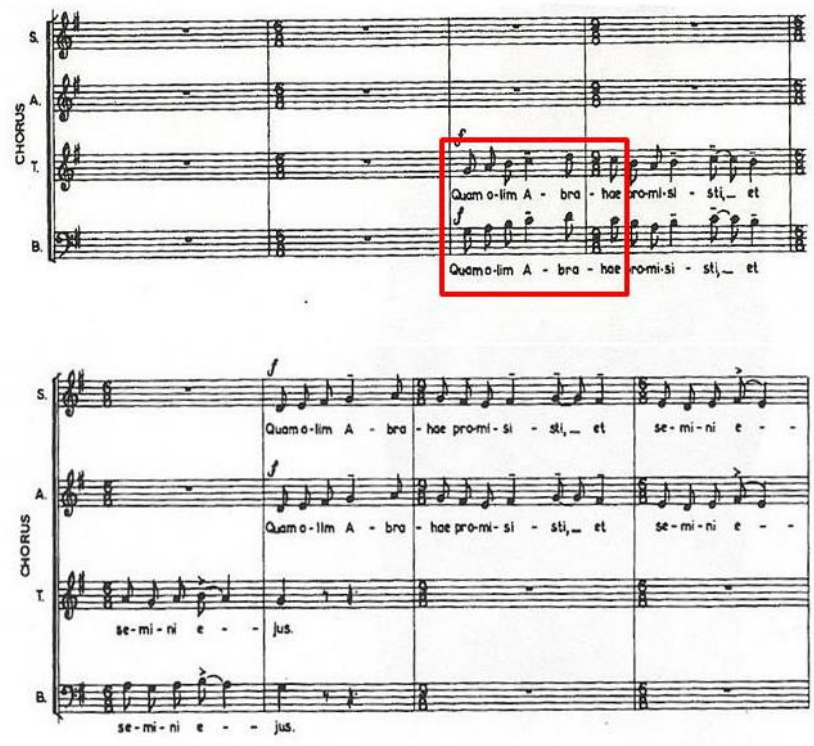
Owen's "Parable" at first closely follows the Biblical story, and thus *Canticle II,* as the story unfolds; however, the literary treatments of the story differ vastly. The mystery play set in Canticle II is a dramatic and slightly Christianized version of the Binding of Isaac that has been cast into a dialogue format. It graphically portrays Abraham's agony as he obeys God's command to offer Isaac in sacrifice. The play reveals the very human side of both Abraham and Isaac, including the fear and suffering that are often encountered by those who conscientiously follow God. It also shows the gracious reward of obedience: In the willingness to give up that which is most dearly loved, one receives the opportunity to actually keep it.

Owen's poetic retelling of the story, however, twists the ending. Instead of obeying God by slaughtering the ram in place of Isaac, Owen has Abram ignore God's offer. This subversion of the Biblical story reveals a darker side of human nature, especially in light of the immediate context of World War I, toward the end of which Owen had written this poem. Owen is criticizing the national leaders (the "old men" of the title) who could have stopped the war but who chose instead to continue fighting, thus sacrificing the young of Europe. Within the context of *War Requiem*, however, Owen's "Parable" offers Britten the means to create the most direct conflict that occurs between the Requiem texts and Owen's poetry. The Offertory text provides an atmosphere in which the original story can be recalled easily, particularly at the phrase "Quam olim Abrahae promisisti, et semini ejus," and Britten ensures the recollection by setting this phrase to material derived from the *Canticle*. He then secures the link by using the same material to set the first four lines of "Parable." (Ex. 2)

Ex. 2a: *Canticle II*, mm. 20-33[5]

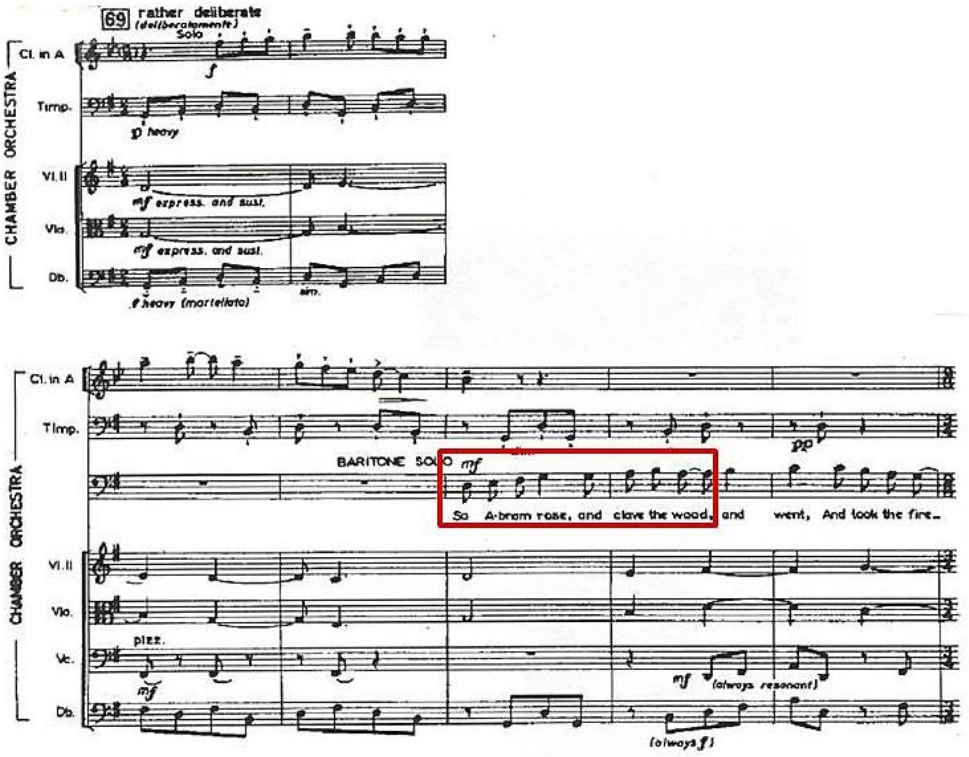


Ex. 2b: Offertorium, "Quam olim Abrahae promisisti…," mm. 39-46[6]



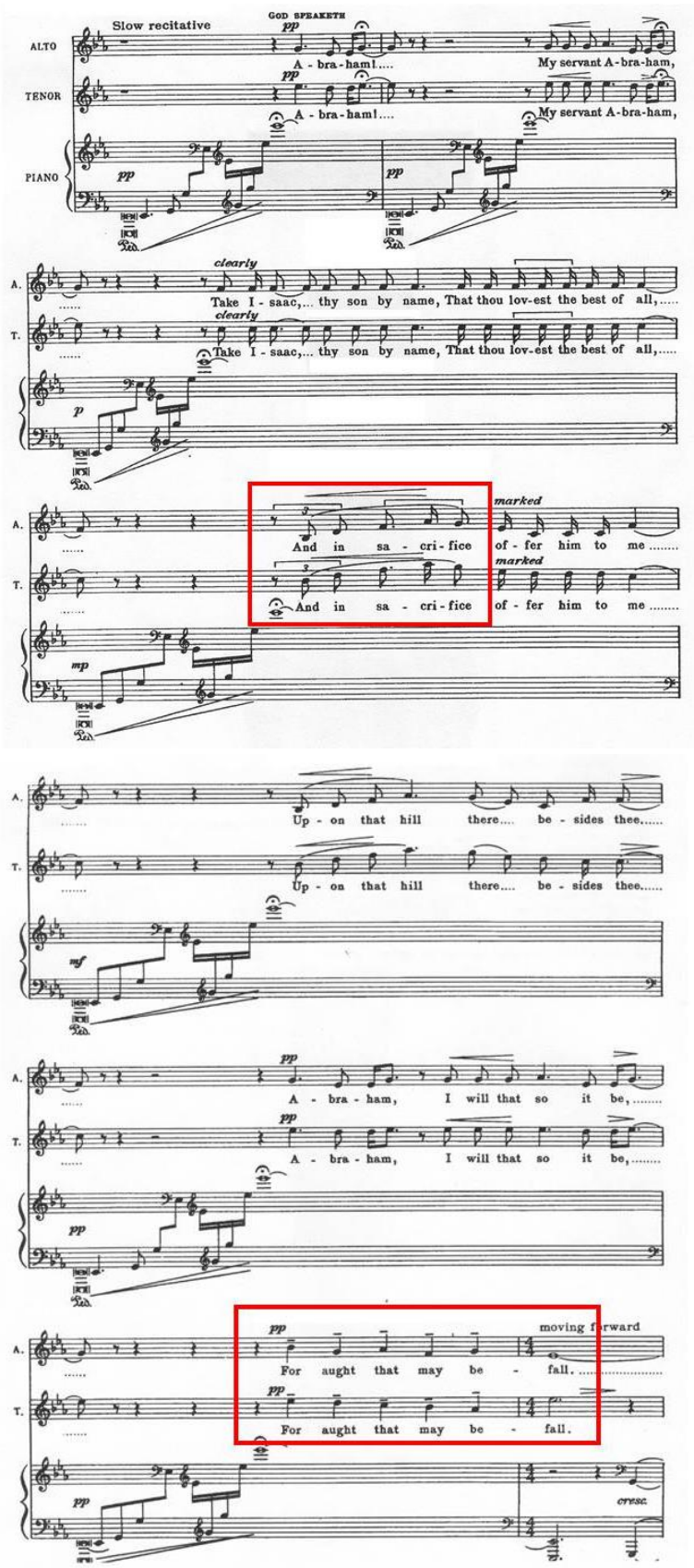
[5] All *Canticle II* examples are from Benjamin Britten, *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac* for alto, tenor, and piano (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1952).
[6] All Offertorium, "Parable," and Libera Me examples are from Benjamin Britten, *War Requiem*, Op. 66, full score (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1962).

Ex. 2c: Offertorium, opening of the "Parable," mm. 108-113



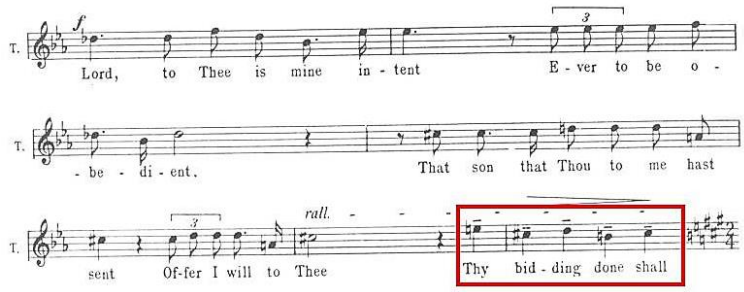
Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that the whole movement, not just these phrases, comes from the *Canticle*. Almost the entire setting of "Parable" comes directly from the *Canticle*, and the surrounding Latin settings are also based in it. With the exceptions of two portions of the orchestration, which represent battle sounds, and one notable departure in the middle of the poem, all of the vocal and instrumental lines of "Parable" rework the appropriate sections of the *Canticle* as determined by textual correlations. The opening Latin sections, meanwhile, are based on the tonal relationships established at the opening of the *Canticle*. Scholars generally agree that, throughout the *Canticle*, Eb symbolizes God and God's will, while Abraham and his obedience to God's will are represented through Db. This is evident from the beginning with the setting of God's voice and Abraham's response. The setting of the voice of God is memorable with its arpeggiated Eb -G figure in the accompaniment; also there are two primary motives, a unison ascending dominant seventh in Eb first heard for the words "And in sacrifice," and a series of descending thirds over a descending scale at the words "For aught that may befall." (Ex. 3) These two motives play important supporting roles as the story unfolds, both in *Canticle II* and in *War Requiem*.

Ex. 3: *Canticle II*, opening (voice of God)

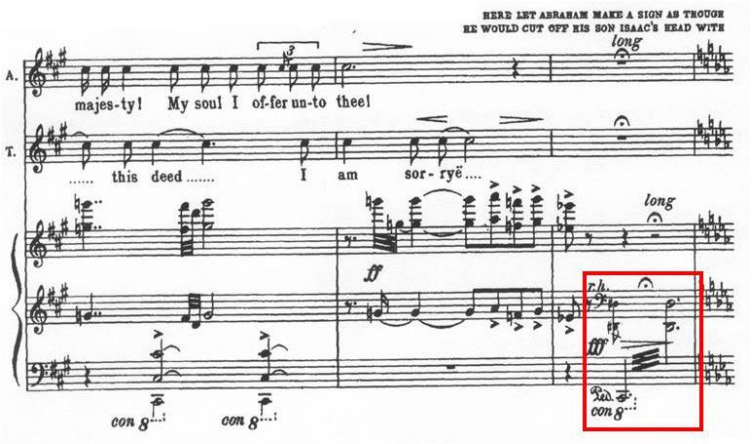


Abraham's response begins with an emphasis on Db and ends with a series of descending thirds on the words "Thy bidding done shall be," confirming his obedience. (Ex. 4) The Db changes to C# in the passage in which Isaac is prepared for sacrifice, and just prior to the intervention of God, at the point when Abraham is about to kill Isaac, the only sound heard is a low tremolo between C# and D#. (Ex. 5) The C# (rather than Db) clearly represents Isaac as the intended sacrifice in the *Canticle*, and Britten retains this symbolism for the Offertorium.

Ex. 4: *Canticle II*, mm. 13-19 (Abraham's response)

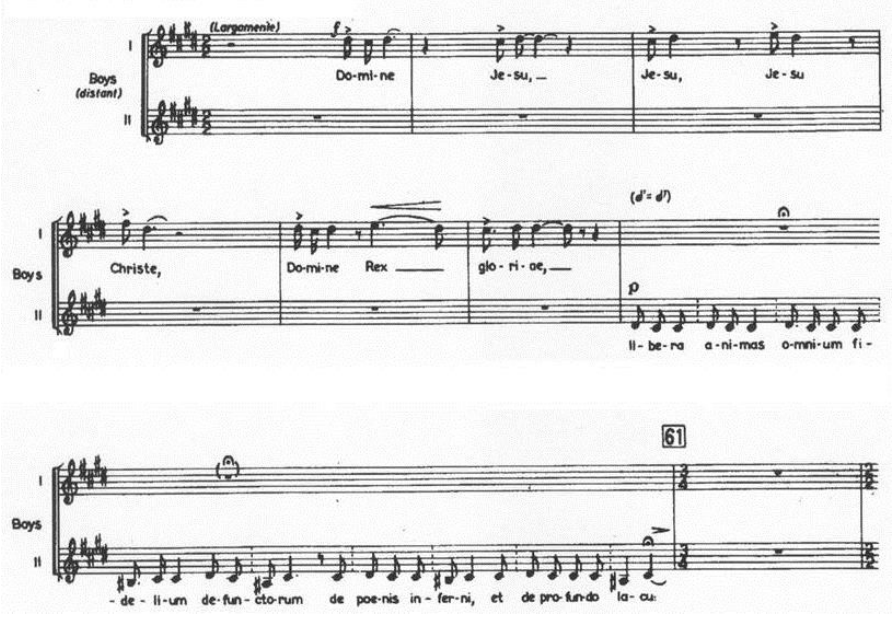


Ex. 5: *Canticle II*, mm. 245-247



Britten's use of the C#-D# interval, with an emphasis on the C# itself, is the foundation of the opening of the Offertorium. (Ex. 6) The subsequent unfolding of the melody through mirror inversion by the two halves of the boys' choir musically supports an emphasis on Isaac and his fate, a foreshadowing of events that will be realized much later in the movement.

Ex. 6: Offertorium, "Domine Jesu Christe," mm. 1-9 (boys' choir only)



The entire opening passage of the Offertorium is notated in C# minor, but it eventually gives way to G major. The initial entry of the full chorus at "Sed signifier sanctus Michael" emphasizes the boys' C#-D# interval but in a belligerent and dissonant manner until the pivotal phrase "Quam olim Abrahae promisisti, et semini ejus" which is in G major. (Ex. 7)

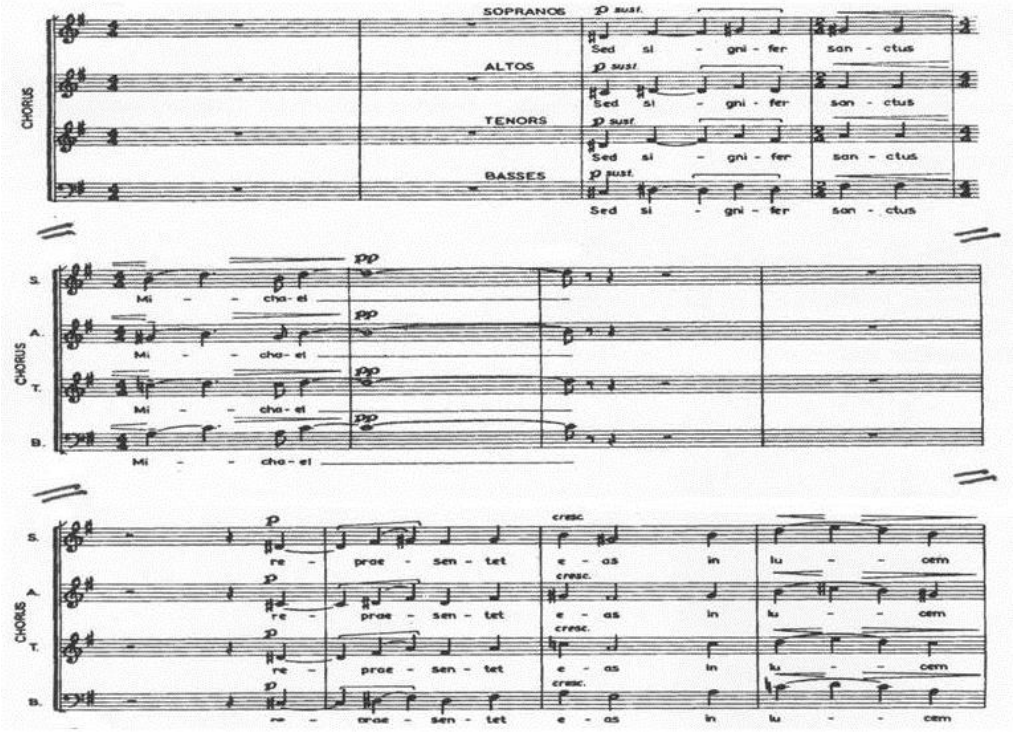
The nature of this "Michael" passage has been characterized by Eric Roseberry, who has delved into this particular aspect of *War Requiem* more than any other writer, as a parody. He states that

> parody is apparent at 'sed signifer sanctus Michael,' not least in the 'false dominant' wrench of its destined 'resolution' into the G major of 'quam olim Abraham [sic] promisisti.' The jaunty rhythm of the rising bugle fanfare, the strangeness and menace of its bony heterophony, the mechanical repetition—these features are not consonant with a 'straight' reading. … [He continues] I would suggest that … Britten's conception of Michael the standard-bearer is something of a caricature, the choral-orchestral militarism of the Old Testament God of 'righteous' battles breaking rudely on the celestial sound of boys' voices and organ.[7]

Is this Michael passage a caricature, a parody? I think not. The idea of creating a caricature of Michael in the context of *War Requiem* is antithetical to the ideals and purpose of the work. Here, context is crucial: *War Requiem* was written specifically for the Coventry Cathedral—the Cathedral of St. Michael—the original building of which was the only cathedral in Great Britain destroyed in World War II. As mentioned earlier, the decision to rebuild the cathedral after the

[7] Eric Roseberry, "'Abraham and Isaac' Revisited: Reflections on a Theme and Its Inversion," in *On Mahler and Britten: Essays in Honour of Donald Mitchell on His Seventieth Birthday*, Aldeburgh Studies in Musics 3, edited by Philip Reed (Woodbridge and Aldeburgh, England: The Boydell Press in conjunction with the Britten-Pears Library, 1995), pp. 257-258.

Ex. 7: Offertorium, "Sed signifier sanctus Michael," mm. 23-38 (chorus only)



war was grounded in the spirit of reconciliation, which has been the heart of its mission since 1940. Would Britten really want to caricature the role of St. Michael within the context of the Cathedral of St. Michael and its mission, a mission that is also at the heart of *War Requiem* itself?

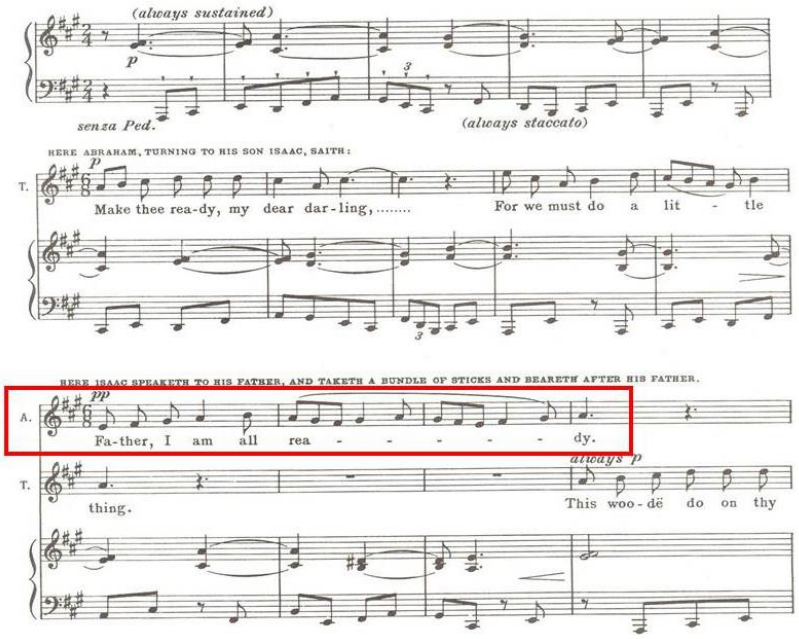
As for the "choral-orchestral militarism" that Roseberry senses, could it be that Michael is attempting to protect Isaac, but failing, just as the original cathedral failed to survive the bombs that destroyed it? Possibly. The rhythm, heterophony, and repetition noted by Roseberry could be construed as a righteous battle by Michael on behalf of the souls symbolized by the boys' choir. From this viewpoint, the Michael passage is yet another illustration of the conflict underlying this part of *War Requiem*, and its dissolution into G major, an inevitable result for Britten's purpose, foreshadows the end result of Owen's retelling of the Abraham and Isaac story.

The move to G major is a necessary outcome here, but not because of any " 'false dominant' wrench"; instead, it occurs because of the nature of the melodic and harmonic construction of the movement as a whole, its relationship to the F#-C tritone that appears in every movement of *War Requiem* except the Offertorium, and the inexorable motion toward the climactic moment of conflict that will be driven home in the actions of Owen's Abram. The Michael passage is built on nine notes—all of the notes of the chromatic scale except F, G, and Bb. Of the three, G is the most significant. G major allows for the filling-in of the missing G, and it is the most distant key in relation to the C# minor of the opening of the movement. G is also one of the expected resolutions of the F#-C tritone, so the G major context of the "Parable," despite a

tonal climax in E major (itself related to G major), is, in effect, an expected tonal outcome of the build-up that has occurred in *War Requiem* up to this point.

To solidify G major and to lead into the setting of Owen's poem, Britten relies on the tradition of setting the phrase "Quam olim Abrahae promisisti" in a fugal manner. Roseberry views this treatment as more evidence of parody, especially since the subject recognizably links the Latin and English texts; is derived melodically and rhythmically from the setting in the *Canticle* of Isaac's statement "Father, I am all ready"; and "seems to mock" the numerous canonic entries that can be found in the *Canticle*.[8] (Ex. 8) If Britten is mocking the *Canticle* here,

Ex. 8: *Canticle II*, mm. 20-33



however, then he is also mocking Mozart, Berlioz, Dvořák, Verdi, and other composers who have treated this phrase in an imitative fashion, not to mention the young men who, like Isaac, obeyed their elders without a full understanding of what could follow. Britten, though, is not mocking, and Roseberry's identification of the source of the subject from Isaac's words "Father, I am all ready" is the key. The focus is still on Isaac, and the manipulations of material that have occurred thus far continue to foreshadow Isaac's fate as related by Owen.

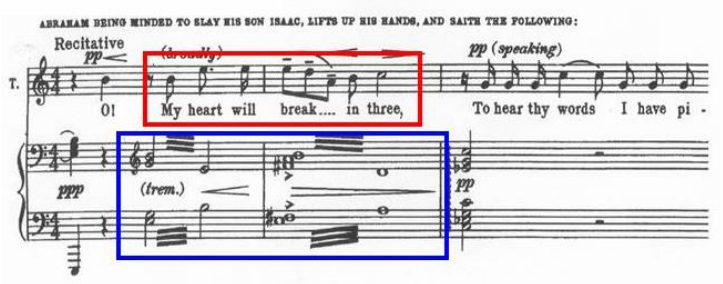
To arrive at the climactic moment in which Abram betrays both God and Isaac, Britten engages in a wholesale reworking of the *Canticle* according to the textual concordances. The original alto, tenor, and piano arrangement is now changed to tenor, baritone, and chamber orchestra for the sake of the new setting, but the basic vocal and accompaniment relationships are the same. The journey to the place of sacrifice retains its rhythmic three-against-two characteristic as the first four lines are related by the voices in a legato 6/8 meter accompanied by a staccato 2/4 bass line. The fifth line of the poem, "Behold the preparations, fire and iron," is set to a sequential

[8] Roseberry, p. 258.

repetition of the motive for "My heart will break in Three" from the *Canticle* with the tremolo piano accompaniment appearing in the string tremolos. (Ex. 9)

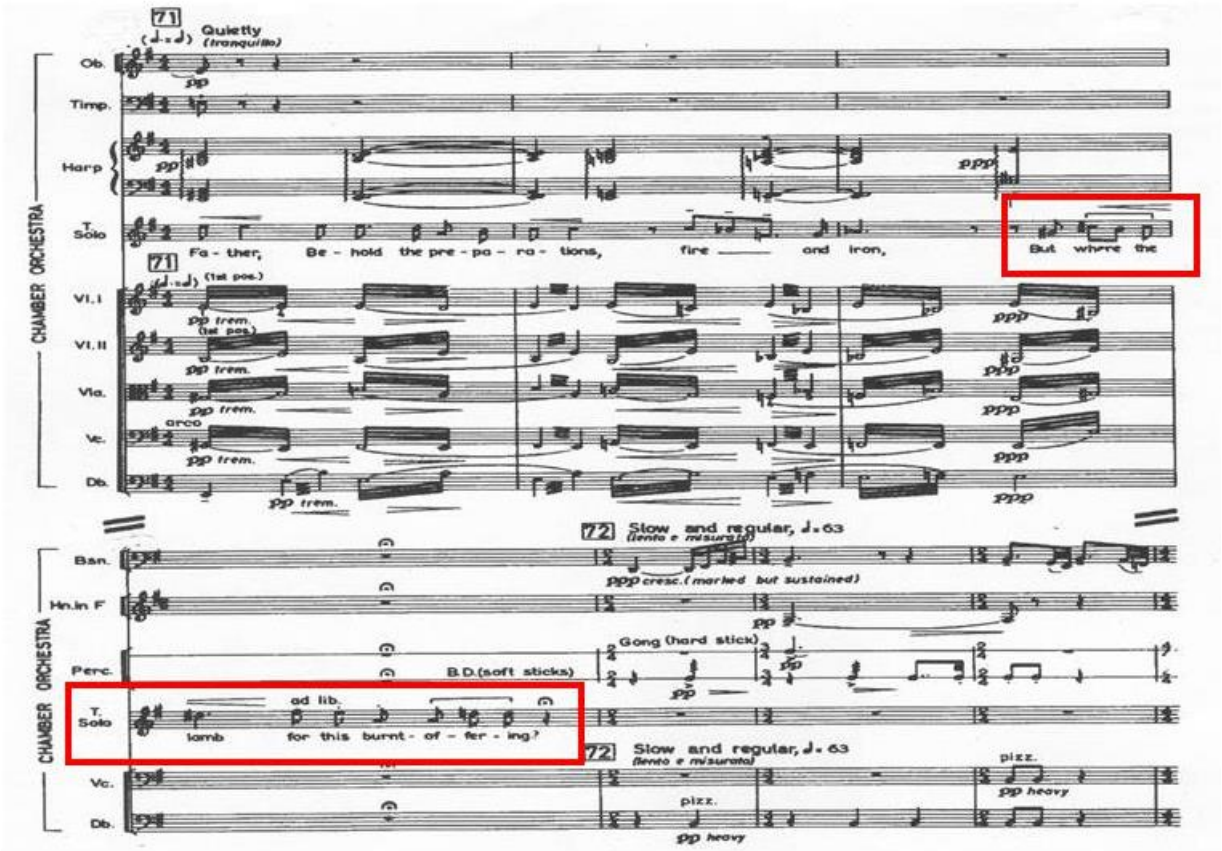
Ex. 9a: Offertorium, "Parable," line 5

Ex. 9b: *Canticle II*, "My heart will break in three," mm. 73-75

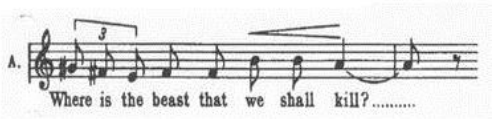


The setting of "Parable" begins to depart from the *Canticle* with the sixth line. (Ex. 10) "But where the lamb for this burnt offering?" is stated with no accompaniment to a variant of the preceding sequence, rather than the corresponding material from the *Canticle*—yet another hint of Isaac's fate. With lines seven and eight, (Ex. 11) the vocal part bears no resemblance to the corresponding section of the *Canticle*, and the accompaniment quickly strays as well. Despite the textual similarities, Owen's text is the source of the infidelity. These lines, "Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,/And builded parapets and trenches there," offer wartime images alien to the original story. In addition, the rhythms present in this section of the *Canticle* provide Britten with the opportunity to add punctuating percussion and lower string pizzicati (in green), along with woodwind versions of the brass fanfares from the opening of the Dies Irae (in blue), to reinforce the now irrevocable encroachment of Owen's world on the Biblical story.

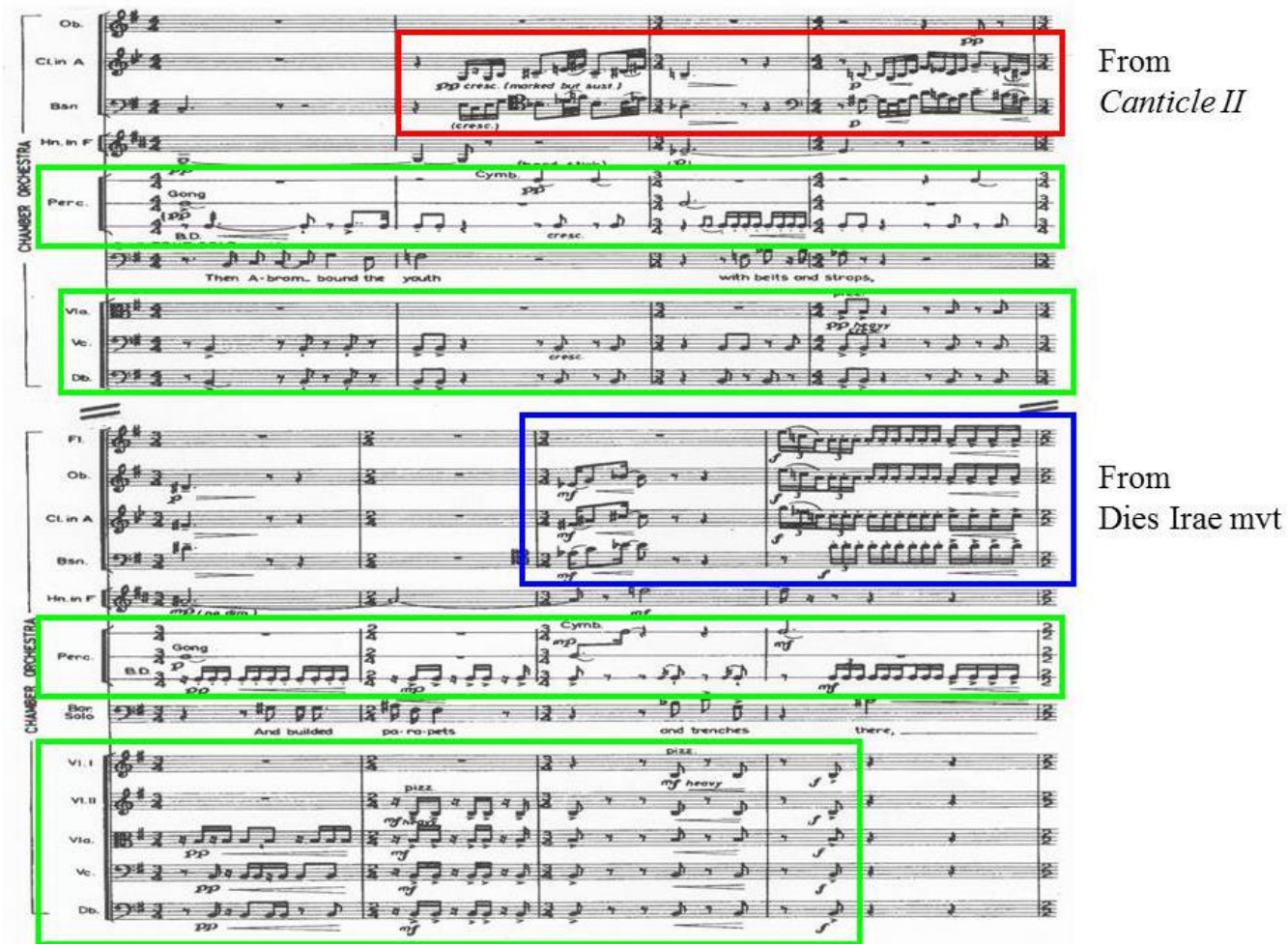
Ex. 10a: Offertorium, "Parable," line 6



Ex. 10b: *Canticle II*, mm. 87-88, motive <u>not</u> used in corresponding portion of "Parable"



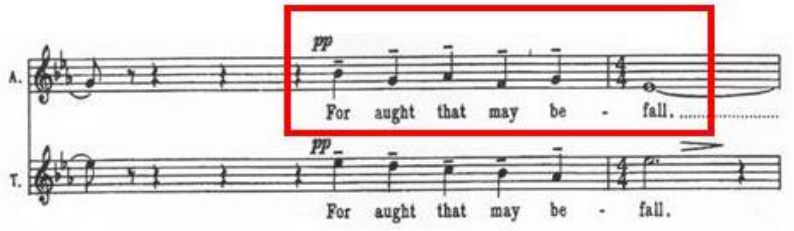
Ex. 11: Offertorium, "Parable," line 7-8



With line nine, where Abram "stretched forth the knife to slay his son," Britten refers back to the motive that accompanied God's words "for aught that may befall," only here he inverts the motive and rhythmically elongates it to emphasize Owen's text. This is followed by an equally inverted and expanded version of one of the battlefield fanfares from the Dies Irae, as Britten continues to foreshadow musically what Isaac's fate will be. (Ex. 12)

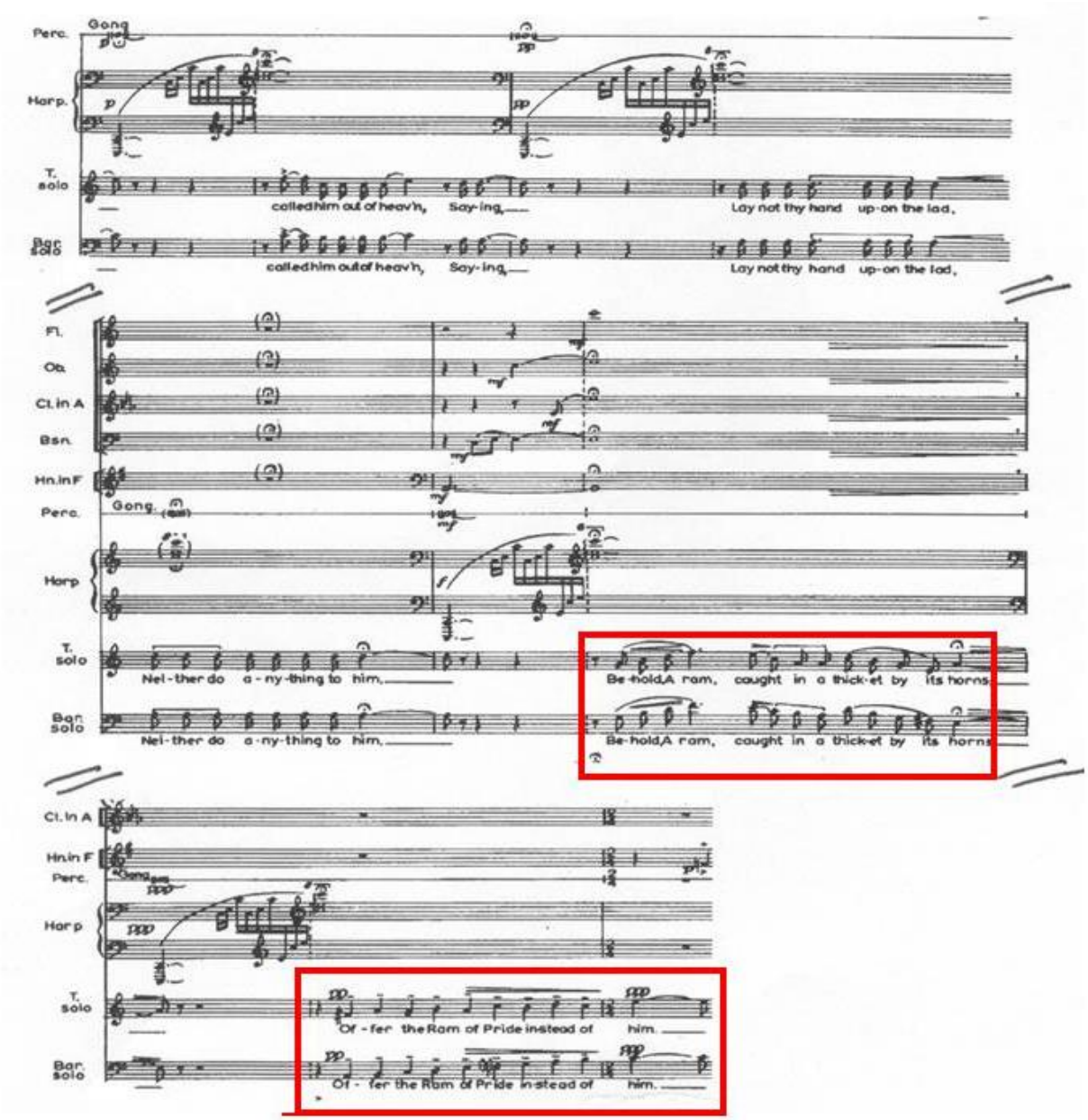
Ex. 12a: Offertorium, "Parable," line 9

Ex. 12b: Canticle II, m. 7



Britten returns abruptly to the *Canticle* as the angel interrupts the sacrifice to remind Abram of the will of God and Abram's promise of obedience to that will. Britten very clearly recalls the *Canticle*'s setting of the voice of God, but in keeping with proceeding through the *Canticle* for his borrowing (despite the exceptions just described), he uses the second occurrence from the *Canticle* rather than the opening. This second occurrence (where God prevents Abraham from killing Isaac) does include some differences from the opening, and unfortunately these have been missed by previous commentators, who use the *Canticle*'s opening as the referent rather than the recurrence. (Ex. 13)

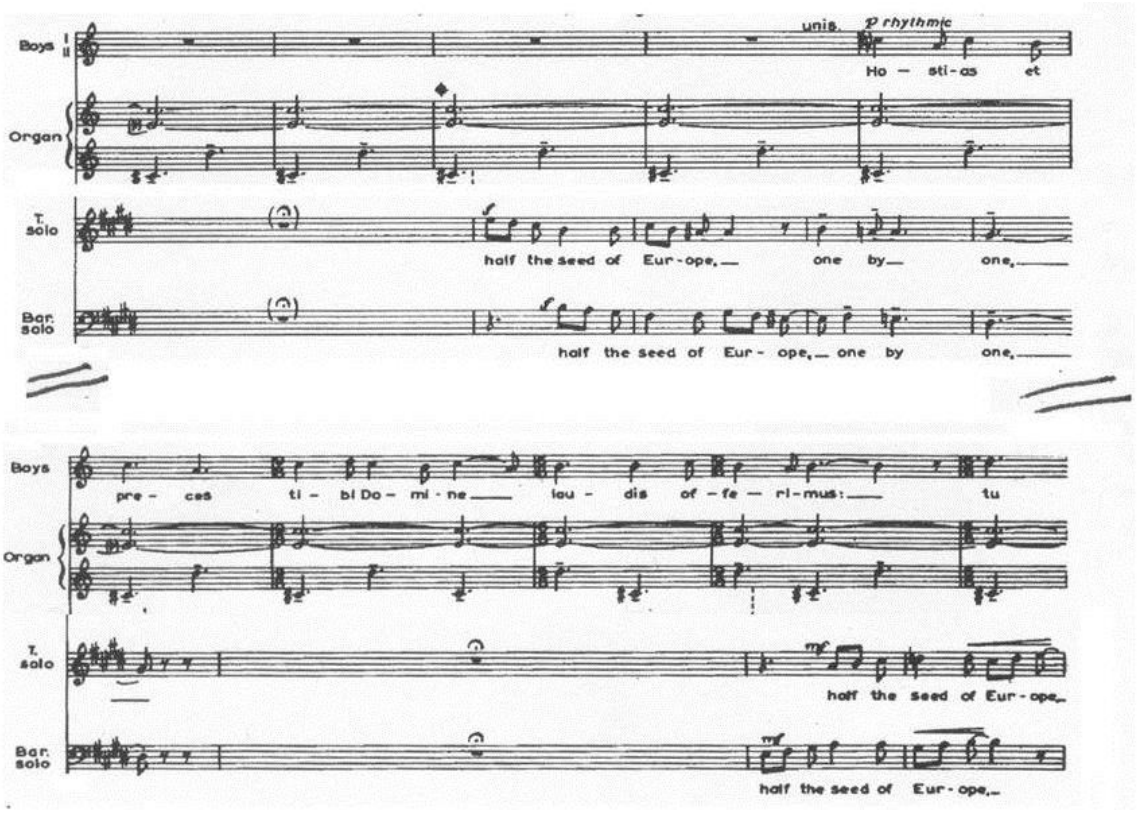
Ex. 13: Offertorium, "Parable," lines 10-14 (angel)



The primary difference is the treatment of the motive that originally was used for the words "And in sacrifice." This motive as found in the *Canticle* (setting the words "for thou dreadest me") is now inverted to illustrate God's recognition of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac out of fear of God and without mercy for Isaac. In the "Parable," however, the motive is inverted again (so it looks like the original motive at the opening of the *Canticle*) and is followed almost immediately by the inverted form of the second motive (earlier used for the text "And stretched forth his knife"), which now sets the text "Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him." The brief orchestral interlude that separates the last two lines of the "Parable" from the remainder of the poem intensifies the suspense as Abram prepares for his final act. In the *Canticle*, this material accompanied Abraham's preparation to sacrifice the ram in place of Isaac. In the "Parable," a final muted battle call briefly interrupts and hints at the sacrifice. Isaac is not spared.

With this moment, the conflict has reached its culmination, and Britten drives the point home in two ways. One is that he subverts the ending of the *Canticle* and its emphasis on obedience in order to accompany Owen's subversion of the story and its emphasis on disobedience and the merciless slaughter of innocent lives; the other is to overlay the repetitions of the last line of Owen's text with the Offertory verse sung by the boys' choir, with its tonal orientation around the earlier C# that symbolizes Isaac's relation to God. (Ex. 14) It is clear now that the boys represent Isaac and, by extension through Owen's slaughtered "seed of Europe," all of the young men who have been killed in war.

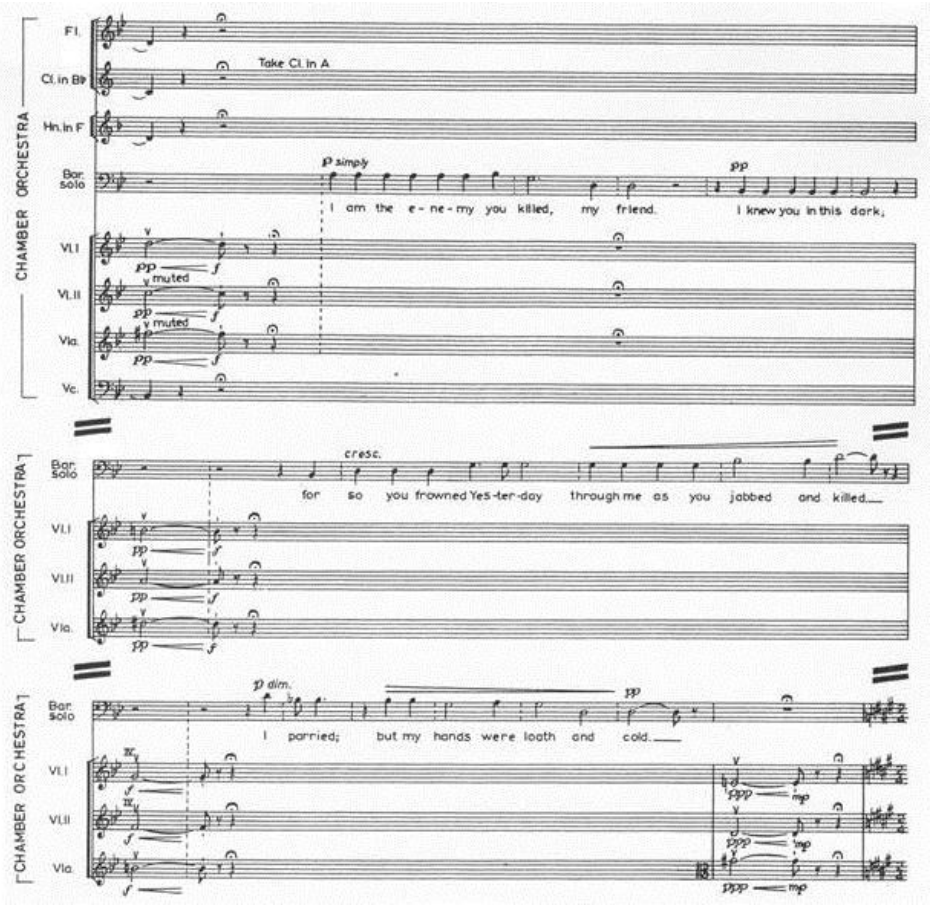
Ex. 14: Offertorium, "Parable," last line, with Offertory verse superimposed (boys' choir/organ and male soloists only)



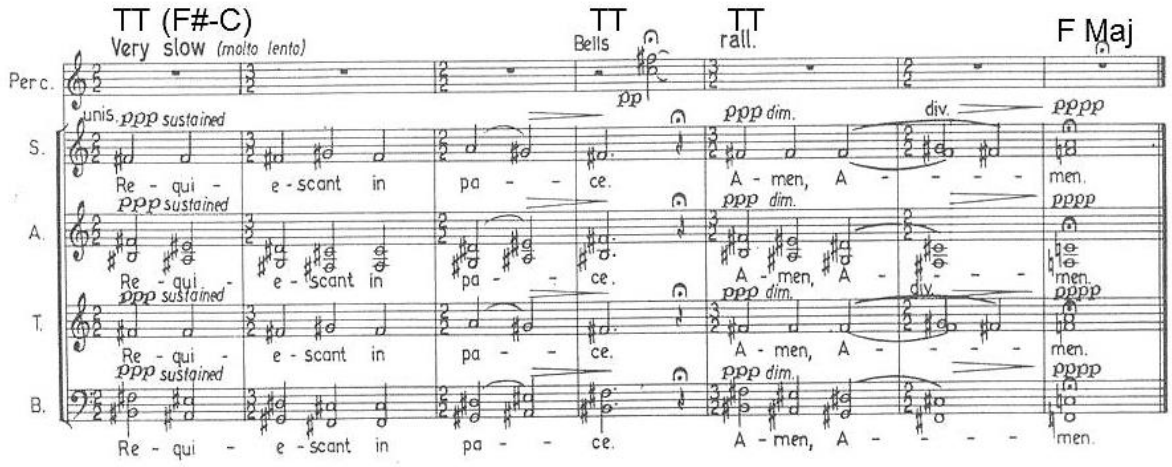
The extent of Britten's reworking of *Canticle II* for the Offertorium appears only after examining and comparing the texts and their settings, rather than the music alone. The textual connections are crucial for understanding not only Britten's reinterpretation of Owen's "Parable," but also his reinterpretation of the Requiem text. Britten's understanding of Abraham, Isaac, and Owen allowed him to rework this portion of the Requiem to create a graphic and climactic illustration of conflict and its consequences. Such an illustration is necessary for the overall development of *War Requiem*, in which the selected Latin liturgical movements act as a framework within and against which the English poems could work to produce the progression from conflict to reconciliation.

The reconciliation that eventually results is by no means a perfect one. Musical elements associated with conflict earlier in *War Requiem*, particularly from the Dies Irae movement, reappear in the last movement, although the texts are pointing clearly toward a resolution. In addition, the F#-C tritone that has dominated the work *except* in the Offertorium is not resolved conclusively to G major or minor as one would expect, although at the moment the English text arrives at its moment of reconciliation, Britten does clearly state it in G minor. (Ex. 15) In the final moments of the Latin setting, however, he repeats for a third and final time the chordal progression that takes the F#-C tritone to F major. (Ex. 16)

Ex. 15: Libera Me, "Strange Meeting," ('I am the enemy you killed, my friend…")



Ex. 16: Libera Me, "Requiescant in pace. Amen."



That Britten chose to associate the tritone primarily with the Latin texts is somewhat ironic; however, the use of the tritone is symbolic: from a theoretical point of view, the tritone is the interval most in need of a resolution and has a very small number of possible "correct" resolutions, since it is usually associated with only one major and one minor key. The fact that Britten never resolves the F#-C tritone "properly," despite the appearance of G major in the Offertorium, which arrives only by way of another tritonal relationship, may be his way of pointing out that non-conventional means for achieving desired ends may be necessary to break out of old habits or complacent reliance on tradition—much the way that the bombing of the old Coventry Cathedral resulted in an unexpected attitude of forgiveness and reconciliation on the part of its congregation. Certainly the Offertorium movement is an unconventional setting of the Abraham and Isaac story, but it rightfully puts the emphasis on those who died, as well as the circumstances under which they died. The movement by itself does not console the living and some would argue that the entire *War Requiem* does not. With careful contemplation of both the Latin and English texts and their relationships, though, and being mindful of the context of the Coventry Cathedral, *War Requiem* is indeed a thoughtful means of honoring those who made the ultimate sacrifice, as well as those who continually strive for reconciliation in this conflicted world.